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SUBJECT: IN THE EYE OF THE STORM: ABECHE, CHAD'S EASTERN METROPOLE

REF: A. 1989 NDJAMENA 1409

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SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Abeche, the metropole of eastern Chad, is the center of activity for the local population and the international community's humanitarian and peacekeeping operations, as well as the far-flung region's commercial and administrative center, both civilian and military. The GOC's efforts toward poverty reduction and development are evident here, but so too are the attendant social and economic stresses due to the vastly increased international presence here -- humanitarian international organizations and NGOs, the UN PKO, and the contractors who provide logistical support to them as they assist the 300,000 Sudanese refugees, 200,000 Chadian IDPs and local populations. The cost of living for ordinary "abechois" has increased dramatically, as have problems with access to water and other resources, and most grave -- greatly increased criminality and banditry. The international community provides some humanitarian and development assistance to the local populations, but not nearly on the scale of humanitarian assistance aimed at the refugees and IDPs.

12. (SBU) Although the local population blames the international community for many of Abeche's current problems, their complaints are accurate only in so far as the assistance provided is indeed badly balanced between the "newcomers" and the "locals." Many of the region's social problems and lack of development pre-date the arrival of refugees and IDPs, but there is however no doubt that the international humanitarian and PKO presence has significantly exacerbated those societal and economic problems. At the same time, it has heightened the awareness of the local population to the development needs of the city and the wider region. The example of the attention paid to the needs of the refugees and IDPs by the international community and the GOC has spurred the local populations, including many IDPs, to recognize that they are just as vulnerable from the essential conditions of their lives, unchanged for decades, and that they have legitimate right to clamor for essential services, either from their own authorities, or from more

international organizations. END SUMMARY.

KEY POINTS

¶3. (SBU) Key points follow:

- Abeche and the region are under stress -- societal, economic, environmental, security;
- Locals resent the very negative impact of humanitarian and peacekeeping actors;
- GOC and MINURCAT are providing some development assistance to the local community; and
- Assistance decisions must take into account the needs of the local population.

CHAD'S EASTERN CENTER

¶4. (SBU) Abeche, with a Chadian population around 50,000, is the country's largest eastern city and ranks fourth in size after N'Djamena and southern cities Moundou and Sarh. The city is the capital of the Ouaddai region, whose population of 730,000 in the 2009 census made it the fourth most populous of Chad's 21 regions. Prime Minister Youssouf Salah Abbas, Higher Education Minister Ahmat Taboeye, and Interior Minister Ahmat Bachir all come from the Ouaddai region. As throughout Chad, most Ouaddians are subsistence herders and farmers (with about ten percent of the region's land under cultivation). As the historical capital of Dar Ouaddai, Abeche has played a central role in all of the key moments in the relationships among the political, ethnic, and economic groups that have interacted in Ouaddai and Darfur sultanates long predating the Chad-Sudan border. Indeed, as Ref A makes clear, Abeche traditionally looked more toward the East and

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Sudan for its economic and social relations than westward to the rest of Chad.

¶5. (SBU) In addition to its stature as Chad's eastern metropole, Abeche has been the hub for all humanitarian operations in eastern Chad since the current crisis began in ¶2004. It hosts the forward deployed operational headquarters of MINURCAT, the UN peacekeeping operation for Chad and the Central African Republic, and the logistics offices of all UN humanitarian agencies and partner NGOs. By most estimates, the UN and international NGO presence has tripled or quadrupled the population of Abeche since the onset of the current iteration of conflict in eastern Chad and western Sudan in 2004.

ABECHE TODAY:
POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES

¶6. (SBU) The government's efforts to implement its poverty reduction strategy, coupled with the international presence, are having some positive impacts on Abeche. For example, the government is benefiting from a Chinese assistance program to improve the road infrastructure between N'Djamena and Abeche and pol/econoff had to detour around some of the city's main thoroughfares that were being graded and paved -- a welcome development for the city's population in general as well as for the operators of the Indian-manufactured three-wheelers tooling around. Some 4,000 Chinese may be based in Abeche for road and other infrastructure projects, but remain confined almost exclusively to their compounds outside of work hours.

¶7. (SBU) The government has also recently used Abeche to launch a nationwide campaign against gender-based violence and to host a forum on human rights issues in the north and east of Chad, both in partnership with UN agencies. The

government's local representative of the Ministry of Social Action told pol/econoff that the ministry is working with local cooperative associations to provide needed items such as materials and human resources. The GOC is also in the final stages of outfitting a vocational and technical training center for youths 14-18 years old. Other local and religious groups provide employment and schooling opportunities for some of the most destitute: abused women and abandoned children.

¶8. (SBU) The local government-controlled radio station, broadcasting in French, Arabic, and Maba, is responsible for the entire region but only has enough power to transmit for 25 kilometers. The director at Radio Abeche said that the station features health and religious call-in shows, in addition to culture and sports programs, but that he regrets that he can not use the radio as the means of political and social debate it should be. Both local and international interlocutors, however, said that they listened to the State/PRM-funded InterNews station, Voices of Ouaddai, which has greater transmission power than Radio Abeche.

¶9. (SBU) The increased international presence has had a mixed impact on Abeche. Three local banks opened branches in Abeche in 2008, bringing to four the total number of banking institutions. Increased demand for housing driven by the rapid expansion of humanitarian operations in the region has raised real estate prices, which has only benefitted the few who are landowners. By all other accounts, we witnessed the various negative impacts of the international presence. Cost of living has risen dramatically, with basic foodstuffs three to four times as expensive. Many local families can no longer afford the increased cost of housing or even to feed themselves; the number of abandoned children has increased. The fragile ecosystem of the semi-arid environment, which barely managed to provide water resources to sustain the historic indigenous population, is insufficient to serve the new expanded population.

¶10. (SBU) The local population, with an imperfect understanding of the requirements of UN and INGO operations, feels unfairly excluded from both the assistance brought to the region and business opportunities that the international

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presence might be expected to bring. Some local interlocutors recognized that UN humanitarian and political agencies were providing some assistance to local populations, but regretted that the efforts were not sufficient or robust. Members of the local branch of the Chamber of Commerce were not satisfied when pol/econoff noted that MINURCAT, UN agencies, and INGOs hire local staff members for offices throughout the area of operations, instead opining that the number of international staff brought to fill positions was excessive, and insisting that any Chadian was as competent as any foreign worker. Chamber members complained that MINURCAT did not involve the local business community in sourcing goods or construction projects, but then admitted that local firms are unable to supply materials in sufficient quality or amounts in a timely fashion, given that the border closure with Sudan -- due to the Darfur conflict -- often meant a six-month delivery time for imports to transit from Dubai, via Egypt and Libya. Other contacts shared that Sudanese goods still cross the officially closed border, but that those imports are mainly basic food items in a volume commensurate with the local population's needs.

¶11. (SBU) Crime and general lawlessness have also risen dramatically in the region since the expansion of the international presence. The international community introduced valuable goods -- cars, electronics, personal property, themselves -- into a region where the Chadian state is at its weakest -- with police, judicial, political acceptance of impunity. Security is now a life-threatening concern for locals and foreigners (Ref B).

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) The international community in Abeche has clearly put economic and environmental pressure on this semi-arid desert city, significantly exacerbating societal problems and resource constraints that predate the arrival of the refugees or the peacekeeping operation. Increased activity in the city has heightened awareness of the development needs of the city and the wider region. The magnitude of the peacekeeping and humanitarian operation focused on the refugees and internally displaced, especially the rapid provision of effective health and water infrastructures to populations vulnerable from conflict contrasts starkly with the services and assistance received by the local population, just as vulnerable from the essential conditions of their lives, unchanged for decades, who have legitimate right to clamor for basic services, either from their own authorities, or from international organizations.

¶13. (SBU) Positively, one of the more significant development projects that affects the population both in and around Abeche is the USAID-funded Africare Food Security Initiative which has been implemented in this area since the mid-1980s. The project currently focuses on increasing food security through agricultural production in areas adjacent to wadis (seasonal rivers) and on improving health status of women and children. It is projects like this for Abeche residents and other local populations that the USG can not ignore when prioritizing development assistance. END COMMENT.

¶14. (U) Minimize considered.
NIGRO